The Snake Doesn't Have to Have All the Lines
Exodus 4:10-20
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Text: "The man said, "The Woman you gave me for a companion, she gave me fruit from the tree..." ...The woman said, "The serpent tricked me..." Genesis 3: 12-13 N.E.B.

Fifty thousand American lives have been lost, 150 billion dollars spent and the most urgent problem last week was how to get the remaining Americans out before the people for whom that sacrifice ostensibly was made turned on them. But what can I do about it? Better, it seems, not to think about it for too long.

The rivers and lakes are filthy, the air poluted, wild life poisoned, the Atomic Energy Commission is trying to convince me that it can bury radio-active waste that will remain lethaly active for a thousand years. What can I do about it?

My state grants to a Mother and her children who have no means of support exactly half the amount of assistance she needs in order to subsist. Patients in mental hospitals must be drugged in order to control them because of over-crowding: an official recommended last week that no new admissions be made. What can I do about it?

Surely I'm not responsible for all that. Surely my personal accountability does not include foreign policy, environmental protection and state revenue allocations. We have experts for that sort of thing. Besides, what does that have to do with God and the Gospel? I don't need to come to Church to hear about all that: I can read the newspapers.

Ambitiously prophetic sermons on the Social Gospel often begin with a series (*) of statements like that. The intent, I suppose, is to make people feel guilty. The result is often that people get angry. This sermon, intends - at least - to be different. ↑

(*) I am not being coy. I am not parodying you. I am confessing that that is how I feel. The opening statements are my own. I hope they reflect an

anxiety you have felt as well. Our personal sphere of influence is limited: we live in a highly complex culture: we simply cannot bear the burdens of the world. We come to Church, at least in part, to be reminded that everything going on around us is not the sum total of reality. Some more than others, but all of us are here in part to be reminded that God is in His heaven, in spite of the terrible things that happen in the world.

. We began two weeks ago by asking "Whatever Happened to Sin" and discovered that individual responsibility has disappeared as sin became crime and then the symptom of social illness. Last week we thought about sin as egotism - personally and corporately. This week I invite you to think about a very ancient concept of sin which has not received the attention it deserves. And I would begin by lifting up one of the primal Old Testament stories; the call of Moses.

I can generate a great deal of sympathy for Moses. Things had been going well with him for a change. A short time before, as an adopted member of Egyptian royalty, he had killed one of Pharoh's men in a righteous rage and had barely escaped from Egypt with his life. But now he was content, living with his wife in Midian, tending the flocks of Jethro, his new father-in-law. His sphere of influence and responsibility had been drastically reduced and he was quite comfortable. But then Moses had that disturbing experience with a burning bush and now God was ordering him to return to Egypt - where he was wanted for murder - and there, of all things, to organize the people of Israel for an escape. It was a preposterous proposal: He wanted no part of it: he didn't want to be a revolutionary: he had a taste of trouble and compared with that harrowing experience the life of a sheep herder was really rather pleasant. He didn't want to be anything other than he was. And in the fourth chapter of Exodus we find him back-pedalling as fast as he could, trying desparately to avoid the heavy responsibility which was

beckoning. "Oh my Lord, send, I pray, some other person" - "Surely, Lord, you have an expert for this, someone who knows how to do it." But the only help Moses got was Aaron who would do the talking. And down he went into Egypt, pushed by God into becoming something more than he was, more than he wanted to be, Moses the shepherd on his way to becoming Moses the Savior and Liberator of his people.

Translate that,

Moses, I would submit, is a prototype of humanity: in his reluctant reaction to larger responsibility an accurate description of us as we desperately try to avoid confronting the problems of our civilization. The story of man begins in Genesis: Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, given dominion - responsibility, accountability, power - over the rest of creation. The first thing Eve does is to allow a serpent to talk her into eating an apple. The first thing Adam does is to allow Eve to talk him into following suit. When God confronts them with their offense, Adam says "she did it"; Eve says, "the serpent tricked me". That is to say, in the opening chapter of the human drama, the snake has all the lines. Humanity is pictured in terms of abdication of responsibility, refusal to be what God intended people to be. Certainly pride or egotism is at the heart of the human condition. But just as certainly that analysis is incomplete until it deals with this clear Biblical motif; namely that man consistantly refuses to be as big as God created him.

Go deeper than Moses. The classic Biblical diagnosis of the human condition is that man is rebellious, insolent - unwilling to live with limits superimposed by God. Sin is pride, vanity - man's desire to be more than he is. This morning let's look at it again, with an eye for whatever else the Bible may be saying.

Created in God's image, man is given Trusteeship over the rest of creation.

I ventured one time to discuss the Presbyterian form of worship with a group of Senior Highs. After discussing the basic parts of the service they became quite specific and aired some rather typical youthful complaints about music, and formality and rigidity and language. One young man focused sharply: What got him, he said, was that phrase that kept popping up in the prayer of confession, "slothful in good." I agreed that it was less than

precise and that it sounded curiously archaic and antiquated. I have, since that time, changed my mind. I have, out of my own life experience, concluded that "slothfulness in good" needs confessing rather regularly: that while a typical Presbyterian may not steal, murder or cheat and therefore feel untouched by the traditional definitions of sin, there is plenty of room under the umbrella of slothfulness for almost all of us. We don't want to be responsible for our own existence: we certainly don't want to be responsible for what happened in South East Asia, or for an A.D.C. family or for the conditions in State mental hospitals. We prefer tending our own sheep: we don't want to be responsible for something as awesome as "dominion over creation." That is our sin. Our sheep are quite enough to keep us occupied.

Sloth, in the ancient church, used to be regarded as one of the seven deadly sins. That is, the early Church theologians saw it as one of the "source" conditions behind a lot of wrong behavior. The ancients understood that pride and sloth go hand in hand to create man's predicament.

Harvey Cox defines sloth, which comes from a Greek word meaning "not caring", as "the determined or lackadaisical refusal to live up to one's essential humanity. It is the torpid unwillingness to revel in the delights or to share in the responsibilities of being fully human. It means to decline a full share of ...life..." (Who's Killing the Church p 111-112)

Karl Menninger writes, "...there is a sin of not doing, of not knowing, of not finding out what one must do - in short, of not caring..." (Whatever Became of Sin? p 148)

In the last century the brilliant Dane, Soren Kierkegaard taught that the only real sin is "the despairing refusal to be oneself." And

Rollo May in his best seller Love and Will, urges modern men to stop conforming to the images and expectations superimposed by others and to become - to decide to be - to will and intend life, rather than withdrawing to the anesthesia of television and simply letting life happen. as it comes at us.

It is not difficult to observe the infectious evil that results from sloth; In Hannah Arendt's biography of Adolf Eichmann, the subject comes across as an altogether ordinary man: a man capable of monstrous evil simply by doing his job, following orders, and not asking questions. But that was Germany, Nazism. Not here certainly: that wouldn't happen in this country. (We bristle at thoughtless comparisons like that.)

In 1967 that thesis was tested at Yale University. A cross section of 2,000 males from Bridgeport, Connecicut participated in the test. Divided into groups of learners and teachers, a learner was strapped into a chair which was wired for electric current. Behind a wall in an adjoining room teachers were seated at a table. An inter-com allowed sound to be heard in both rooms. The teachers were instructed to ask a list of questions and then administer electric shocks to the learners by pressing a button for each wrong answer. The teachers were told that each shock would increase in velocity. There was no shock, of course, but into the inter-com were fed recordings of screams of pain. The object was to discover at what point individuals would refuse to obey instructions in a rather authoritarian atmosphere out of conscience or compassion. The result? 62% of those tested went all the way, administering all the current they could. The researcher concluded, "With numbing regularity good people were seen to knuckle under the demands of authority and perform actions that were callous and severe. Men who in everyday life are responsible and decent were seduced by the trappings of authority. The results are...

disturbing. (Thomas Harris, I'm O.K. - You're O.K., p 249-250)

In theological terms 62% were guilty of the sin of sloth. They allowed the snake all the lines: someone else - in this case the symbols of authority and scientific neutrality determined who they would be.

In personal terms sloth is essentially a denial of self: a refusal to be authentically and unapologetically one's own person. Part of that derives, I believe, from the fact that popular theology is more Greek than Hebrew. We have been taught, rather consistantly, that to be fully human is to be a sinner: that the normal needs, desires and appetites of our humanity are something to be denied and that the goal of religiosity is to deliver us from our own humanity. That is very Greek. And the result is a frame of reference that regards self-assertion as fundamentally wrong. And so we let others dictate who we will be - not always because we lack courage - but because we think it is better that way. There is a very fine line between honest humility and abdication of our humanity.

The late Dag Hammarskjold had a deep sense of that enigma. In 1953 he wrote "Except in faith, nobody is humble. The mask of weakness or of Pharisaism is not the naked mask of humility."

And except in faith, nobody is proud. The vanity displayed in all its varieties by the spiritually immature is not pride. To be, in faith both humble and proud: that is, to live..." (Markings p. 92)

On an intimate level I an guilty of the sin of sloth when, for instance, another person's anger and meaness causes me to be angry and mean. For that moment I have abdicated and have become something I did not intend. Archie Bunker illustrates the sin of sloth, in plain eloquence, as he opens a beer, sits in his favorite chair and asks, "What's the matter with revenge?

It's a perfect way of getting even."

But the real danger of sloth, and the reason why it should be of major concern to men of good will, is that it subtly supports that twentieth century innovation called "group-think." As our civilization has become more complex the number of groups within that civilization has multiplied immensely. Some of those groups have become so large that they dwarf entire nations in past history. In those groups individuals tend to get lost. Indeed, in order to function, the group has to generate some kind of consensus, some method whereby individuals are absorbed in the whole: individual peculiarities - but also individual hopes, dreams, wisdom, morals, conscience.

On the one hand, "group-think" attempts to draw every individual into the decision making process and appears to be very democratic and therefore good. But in the process of drawing everybody in individual particularities must be left out. An editorial in the Chicago Daily News observed that "A business that defined right and wrong in terms that would satisify a well-developed contemporary conscience could not survive," and went on to sympathize with the conscientious executive who "is almost surely a troubled man." (Menninger, op.cite p 117) Somewhere, somehow the individual must take a stand: somehow, and it will never be easy, the individual must reassert his individuality - his personhood - and be all that he is and can be. Somehow, in our complex civilization the individual must save us from ourselves.

In the book to which I have referred many times in this series, Dr. Menninger writes: "If a group of people can be made to share the responsibility for what would be a sin if an individual did it, the load of guilt rapidly lifts from the shoulders of all concerned" (op.cite p 95) "My proposal is for the revival or reassertion of personal responsibility in all human acts, good and bad." (op.cite, p 178)

The Russian Poet Alexander Solzenitsyn knows a little bit about group-think as it pervades a communist state. He knows about the individual being coerced to deny individuality for the sake of the people. And he wrote, ("mankind's sole salvation lies in everyone making everything his business.") [op. cit. p 198]

On a personal level we need, it seems, a strong dose of old-fashioned accountability. We may be, in part, a product of our environment and our genes - but we are, also, who we are. And we do not need to go on, indefinetly, being less that we can be.

On a corporate level we need, it seems, that same old-fashioned dose. Evil in the world is not a vague, amorphous, mystical phenomen - the product of the stars, or satan. It is, almost always, ~~the result~~ caused by people - people doing inadequate or wrong things and other people sitting back and watching, doing nothing, ~~but wringing their hands~~. being, that is, "slothful in good".

In the final analysis, apart from a reminiscence of strong individuality, we are in deep trouble indeed. Apart from individual willingness to bear responsibility we will continue to limp into an ominous future. But given that rebirth, there is hope: hope that we can be better people and the world a better, kindlier place for our children.

The Biblical image of man, beginning with the story of Adam and Eve, portrays humanity in terms of great potential, assigned a lofty position as co-creator with God, given dominion over the entire world. The first Adam sold out. The snake had all the lines. But God did not give up on his creation. Rather, there is a new man, a second Adam. In Jesus Christ we have seen man as God intended him to be: free, responsible, caring, fully human.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a call, not to servility, not to self-deprecation, not to self effacement. Rather the Gospel is based on God's love for man; God's patient love that wants us to become all that we can become. We respond to that Gospel when we seize responsibility for our own lives; when we follow our Lord into ever widening spheres of accountability: when we summon the courage to be responsible for the world over which God gives us dominion. In Jesus Christ we are called to adult accountability for the world: we are called - each of us - to stretch and grow and become everything we were created to become. In Christ God calls us - each of us - to become fully and joyfully human.

St. Paul, with his sometimes brooding sense of sin and evil, nevertheless said it plainly -

> "be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

Regardless of how threatening the future looks to us at the moment, the only way out is ahead. We can cringe and wring our hands at what's to become of us. Or we can walk into the future, affirming it, siezing it, relying on the confidence our God has in us. Because the simple truth of the matter is that the snake doesn't have to have all the lines. Amen.

Father, our status quo is comfortable, and it is not easy to become more than we are. Give us a new sense of our worth and our potential. And walk with us as we learn to be the people you intended us to be: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(*) and the abilities, the skills - the potential he has created in us.